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Matthew C. Stelly

University of Nebraska at Omaha

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Beastification of the Black Athlete: Broadcasters, Word Symbols, and Racial Mythology

Matthew C. Stelly

University of Nebraska at Omaha

“Of the approximately 90,000 college athletes who participate in football, basketball or baseball, fifty percent are black but only six percent of the scholarships go to black athletes.”

As Edward Hill wrote:

"It is commonly accepted that there is a Black dominance in collegiate sports, but in fact it is no real dominance at all. Some fifty percent of the approximately 90,000 college athletes who participate in football, basketball, or baseball are Black. However, only six percent of the scholarships awarded in the United States for all college athletes go to Blacks. Twenty-five percent to thirty-five percent of the Black high school athletes who qualify for athletic scholarships cannot accept them because of deficient academic performance." (Hill, 1983: 35)

To paraphrase the late Satchel Paige: "It is a question of mind over matter. White folks don't mind because 'n-----' don't matter." Or at least this is the unspoken message which becomes crystal clear when we analyze the terminology, symbols, and racial mythology that surround the African American athlete in contemporary American society.

The recent media spectacles surrounding former athlete O.J. Simpson and current athletes Michael Irwin, Mike Tyson, Lawrence Phillips, and a host of others show a need for a social explanation as to why society responds in the manner it responds when these athletes display antisocial behavior.

Antisocial behavior on the part of Blacks, according to this writer, has always been consigned to a category of bestiality or savagery. This ran counter to what Whites promoted for themselves (despite the reality) regarding their self-proclaimed sophistication and civility.

In this paper I explore, in great detail, the "beastification" of Black folks, beginning in slavery when African Americans basically served as beasts of burden. Those in power will use what I call beastification terms to describe our actions and attributes, but this is what they may view as a compliment. In other words, while not quite human, he will give us the benefit of having some qualities of a species he both loves and respects—animals. But even in that, we are subjected to insults and back-handed compliments that I have never heard him heap upon the heads of his pets.

In May 1987, Detroit Pistons guard Isaiah Thomas generally outlined why Black athletes are viewed in "bestial terms" and how these terms are subtly racist. Thomas stated that then-Boston Celtic all-star forward Larry Bird was selected the Most Valuable Player of the league that year because he was White.

Thomas claimed he was only joking when he said, "If Bird was Black, he'd be just another good guy." He added that "when Bird makes a great play, it's due to his thinking... All we [Blacks] ... do is run and jump. We never practice or give a thought to how we play. It's like I came dribbling out of my mother's womb." (Callahan, 1987: 80).

Even now, commercials for the NBA are exploiting and justifying the beastification of professional basketball players in glitzy commercials, ranging from fetching french fries for White children and battling over them to ripping one another off for McDonald's food or playing one-on-one for a quick snack. The athletes are reduced to animal-like behavior for the entertainment and profit of those in power.

But all of this is minor compared to the descriptions provided by the announcers of this sport.

In this paper, I explore these and other athletics-related subject areas to establish the subtle and not-so-subtle ways that Black athletes are "beastified" and how their talents, rather than being attributed to superior human skills, are relegated to areas of animalistic or space creature proportions.

PRESENTER

Matthew C. Stelly is a graduate student in the Department of Public Administration at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. He holds bachelor's degrees in urban studies and Black studies and a master's degree in urban studies, and has completed all course work toward a second master's degree in urban education. Stelly is the former editor of the Milwaukee Courier newspaper, one of the largest African American newspapers in the U.S. He is Director of the Triple One Neighborhood Association in Omaha and has a cable television program, "North Omaha Focus."